In the Beginning, God
There's a Worm in the Apple
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These four sessions will explore ideas that are basic to our identity as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ. Some of these ideas are rooted in and grow out of our Hebrew heritage. Others have been influenced by history; what is going on religiously, politically, economically at the time the Protestant Reformation and emergence of a Reformed Theology, for instance. Other of these ideas emerged when the Gospel of Jesus Christ confronted huge historical movements or influences: Greek Philosophy, for instance, and that period we know as the Enlightenment and Renaissance.

This is not an attempt to address the entirety of Christian theology. We will focus on several key ideas and the commitments that follow, that have shaped the church, the world and define what we hope for, strive for, trust, and how we live our lives.

Needless to say, we live at a time of unprecedented religious diversity. I lived the first two decades or so of my life without ever encountering anyone of another faith tradition. We knew Jewish people, of course, but Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism were exotic, foreign and far away. Diversity was circumscribed by "Catholic, Protestant, Jew," the title of a popular and important book in the fifties by sociologist Will Herberg. "Mixed marriage" meant Catholic-Protestant, regarded in many quarters, including my own, as a tragedy and recipe for disaster.

We live in a very different world. Muslims, Buddhist, Hindus are our neighbors, schoolmates, fellow workers. There are, Harvard's Diane Eck likes to remind us:

So what do we believe – and does it matter? Let's begin at the beginning. We believe in God: that there is a Supreme Being, a Holy Mystery, a force behind, above, beneath and within all reality. We believe in "God the father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth" we say in our oldest statement of faith.

That basic belief was once not only universally shared, but not to believe in God was to be an oddity, out of the mainstream, maybe even un-American and subversive. Today, our central, basic idea is under scrutiny, if not frontal attack.

The late Christopher Hitchens, The Portable Atheist, Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, and Sam Harris, The End of Faith, are highly respected public intellectuals and elegant thinkers and argue the case for atheism: that human reason, the human intellect, human senses, human science, are all we can ultimately rely on: the scientific method is the final arbiter of truth and reality: that if you can't see it, touch it, weigh and measure it, it doesn't exist. End of argument. There is no God. Religion therefore is a monumental waste of time, maybe even dangerous.

There have been other famous atheists in history who have mounted these same arguments: Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, H.C. Mencken. But there is a new edge to it today and, I think, a poignancy.

Distinguished American author Julian Barnes began his highly acclaimed book, Nothing to Be Afraid Of: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." Barnes is not hostile to religion or religious belief. He simply doesn't have any – but, poignantly, misses it.

Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson has a point when she observes that she doesn't believe in the God many of the popular atheists reject. She doesn't believe in a god of petty morality, a god employed to repress and persecute and plunder. She doesn't believe in a God who visits tragedy and disaster and suffering on people to punish, teach a lesson, make a point, nor do I.

The critique of some atheism is serious. I don't believe in a God who is hostile to science and human reason and wants faithful people to ignore or oppose free intellectual inquiry. I don't believe in a god who may be employed in the effort to destroy the nonbeliever, the heretic and infidel.

What we believe is that there is a way to think about reality that is not circumscribed by science. We need all the science we can get. It's just not the whole of reality. No one one ever said that more eloquently than Albert Einstein: "Science without religion is lame, but religion without science is blind." And John Polkinghorne, distinguished mathematical physicist, and an

Anglican Priest: “Standard physical causation cannot adequately describe the manifold ways in which things and people interact” – i.e. there is more to reality than you can squeeze into a list or describe in a formula.

There are two ways of knowing, Polkinghorne asserts: “A scientist could take a beautiful painting, could analyze every scrap of paint on the canvas, tell you what the chemical composition was, would incidentally destroy the painting, but would have missed the point. The chemical composition of the paint is an accurate piece of information, but it is not adequate alone. In fact, it quite misses the essence of the painting, the beauty and truth of it.

You cannot prove God – many have observed. Nor can you disprove God. Atheism – as well as theism, remains a matter of faith.

Central to our faith is that before there was anything there was God: and that God is the source and creator of everything that is.

Our Bible begins – “In the beginning God created.” It is a gorgeous poem – Genesis 1 & 2 is: it is not science or biology and to force it, as fundamentalists and literalists do, is to do it violence, just like the chemist ruining a painting in order to analyze the paint. Arguments about how long each of the seven days of creation was: 24 hours – 24 million years – quite miss the point. So do arguments about whether or not Adam and Eve were real people, where exactly the Garden of Eden was and how in the world Cain found a wife after the family was ejected from the garden – in that Adam and Ever were the only people there were – not only misses the point of the text but does violence to it – forcing it to be something it most certainly is not.

There are, by the way, two creation stories: two distinct narratives: The first, Genesis 1-2:4, begins beautifully: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God (Hebrew – Ruach: wind/breath, spirit) swept over the face of the waters.” Day by day the account describes the creation of earth and sea, fish, birds and animals, food to eat, after each day’s work God looks at what has been created and declares: “It is good. It is very good.” Finally, on the last day God fashions a man and woman, both of them in God’s own image (which puts to rest the argument about whether God is male or female. The answer is clearly: “Yes, God is both). Man and woman are given responsibility for the place: dominion. And then, on the seventh day, God rests.

The second creation story begins at Chapter 2:6 to 4:4. It’s the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent and forbidden fruit, temptation and irresponsibility and it ends with the couple ejected from the garden paradise, on their own now to begin human history, East of Eden and in a

lovely touch, the last thing God does as they leave the safety and security of the garden is make clothes for them.

The people who spend their lives studying these stories, Old Testament scholars who analyze narratives – linguistically, historically, theologically – know that at least the first creation narrative: Genesis 1:1 – 2:4, was written around 587 B.C.E. during what we know as the Babylonian Exile. The story itself is much older, but someone wrote it down during the time when the people of Israel were suffering an unthinkable tragedy. The armies of the Babylonian Empire, the greatest empire at the time, had utterly crushed the armies of Judah, breached the walls of Jerusalem, pretty much destroyed the city and leveled the Temple. That shouldn't happen. That can't happen. We're God chosen people, apple of Gods eye. God – whose name in Hebrew, by the way, is never spoken – is simply a list of Hebrew consonants, JHWH – we added two vowels: an "a" and an "e" and pronounced it Jahweh – Jahweh is our protection, the guarantee of our security, the Temple, built by King Solomon, the Holy of Holies, is the very dwelling place of Jahweh on earth. If it's all gone – what then? The Babylonians, under Emperor Nebuchadnezzar, made a strategic decision to end the Israel nuisance once and for all: not by killing all the Jews, although plenty of that happened, but by way of a devilishly creative scheme. The leaders: politicians, priests, bankers, lawyers, the movers and shakers of Israeli culture, were rounded up and marched across the desert and settled, in a kind of house arrest, in Babylon. The idea was that the culture of Babylon would simply absorb them. The exiles would be assimilated in time and Israel, Jews, Jahweh's chosen people, would simply cease to exist. For the exile community it was a time of existential crisis. One of their poets living among the exile community in Babylon reflected the spirit of the exile in his poem, which we know as Psalm 137

> By the rivers of Babylon –
> there we sat down and there we wept
> when we remember Zion.
> On the willows there
> we hung up our harp.
> For there our captors
> asked us for songs,
> and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
> "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
> How could we sing the Lord's song
> in a foreign land?

The people are not only homesick, they face a profound theological dilemma. If God is almighty, if we are God's chosen people, if Almighty God loves us, how and why is this happening to us. It is, of course, the very same question we all ask on occasion. It's really the basic theological question: is God there? Is there a God who is really in charge?

Later – maybe 70 years later, the exile community is still in Babylon hanging onto their identity for dear life, trying to preserve their culture and religion, teaching their children about a place they had never seen; telling stories of how it used to be when we were home, teaching them the songs. And from back in desolate, burned out Jerusalem comes a letter:

"Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God,
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her,
that she has served her term.

In the wilderness prepare the
way of the Lord.
Every valley shall be lifted up
and every mountain and hill made low
…the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. (Isaiah 40:1-5)

"You're going home" – and that is what happened. But the exile was a defining experience in the life of the people, a time of rich theology and beautiful poetry, which we hear every Advent as we prepare once again to the Glory of the Lord.

But as the time, it was the occasion of profound doubt and despair and the question in every heart was the question of God. Is God really in charge? And it is precisely at that moment that someone wrote Genesis 1-2:4 as an answer to that question:

Yes – there is a God.

Yes – God is in charge.

No – God has not forgotten about us.

Jahweh – God is the creator of all that is. The creation is Jahweh's handiwork. And – get this – everything God made is good. That's a central point. At the end of each day in the story God steps back and looks at the day's work: ocean and sky, sun and moon, plants and animals, fish, birds, and cattle, and finally, the climax of the whole process, man – woman, bearers of God's own image, given responsibility for the whole project. It is all good, very good the writer adds for emphasis.

That is our basic affirmation. Creation, all of it, is God's and all of it is essentially, fundamentally good.

Historically, not everyone has agreed with that. In Babylon for instance, the religion taught that there are two forces constantly at work: good and evil. Sometimes good prevails, sometimes evil. It's a constant struggle. The technical name for it is "Dualism." Hebrew religion is

monotheistic. Babylonian religion was dualistic. It is a resilient idea, still very much around. The Greek philosophers taught it: dividing reality into two separate realms: the physical world of tangible stuff – including human bodies, which sometimes behave badly and ultimately decay: and the spiritual realm: where truth and beauty resides, where there are no limitations of humanity, no temptation, no deterioration, no death.

The Greek idea was to transfer as much of living as possible from the physical realm to the spiritual – where Plato and his philosopher taught ultimate truth, God, that is, resides.

It's still very much around, dualism is. There is tension in early Christianity between the Hebrew idea that all reality is God's and essentially good, and the Greek idea that the physical world is, if not flat out evil, at least suspect and tempting, not nearly as true and beautiful as the spiritual world. It's where we got the idea that to be religious is to be "spiritual," not worldly. That the world, particularly the human body with all its messiness, is best denied: that physical appetites – particularly sexual appetites, are to be ignored and repressed.

And so we have a thousand years of Roman Catholic clerical celibacy and Protestant Evangelicals teaching children to sing:

Be careful little eyes what you see,
Be careful little ears what you hear,
Be careful little hand what you touch,
For the Father up above is looking down in love.

i.e. the physical world is a tempting, morally compromised place, to be avoided, contrary to the powerful, profound, monotheism of Genesis.

Genesis 1:31 "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good."

Deeply a part of the story is final, climactic act of creation, humankind, created in God's image, and given dominion over the entire project. "Dominion" – has been interpreted as the right to subjugate and exploit and to use without regard for the consequences. Actually, "responsibility" is a better word for what happens here. Human beings have responsibility for the way things work in the creation. It's an important job description and it assumes a high view of humankind, a high anthropology.

Made in the very image of God, Genesis puts it. Psalm 8 elaborates.

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name
in all the earth.

When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and stars that you have established,
What are human beings that you
are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little
lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion (responsibility)
over the works of your hands

That's a very high view of humankind. Human beings are valued creatures, given dignity, worth, and responsibility by the creator.

Think of the social and political implications of that. Human life is not expendable, but to be honored and respected. People are not cogs in an economic, political machine, but almost divine creations fashioned in the very image of the creator. Human life matters, a fundamental theological position with enormous social, political and economic implications. So for Christians, human rights, for instance, are far more than a political position. Human rights, that each individual is valuable and to be honored and respected and given the same equal opportunities and rights as any other individual – that is at the very heart of our faith tradition and it is part of what we mean when we say "I believe in God the Father Almighty."

So far so good. But all is not right in creation. There is apparently a worm in the apple. A survey of the daily news – extremist violence, brutal executions, civil unrest, social dysfunction…Clearly, Things Are Not the Way They're Supposed To Be – the title of a fine book by Reformed Theologian Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. What Became of Sin? Karl Menninger asked in a book of that title a generation ago. Menninger was a very distinguished psychiatrist, founder of the Menninger Clinic – and a good Presbyterian, by the way, and he argued that modern Christianity seems to want to ignore one of the basic and most important ideas – namely that human beings have a way of making a mess of things in God's good creation.

Genesis 2 and 3 tells it in terms of another story about Adam and Eve and the Serpent. In the first creation story, human beings are the climax of creation, coming at the end when everything else is in place. In this story, clearly by a different writer, human beings come first, carefully fashioned by God out of dust, mud, a man first, set in the garden and told to help himself to all the food in the garden except the fruit of one tree. The man loves the arrangement but he's lonely. So God created animals and birds and fish and the man names them all. But he's still lonely. So God fashions a woman from one of the man's ribs. Now the man is very happy.

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”

And the man and woman were both naked, and were not ashamed.

And then things start to go downhill fast in the garden paradise. The serpent tells the woman she really doesn’t have to abide by the forbidden fruit rule. She ate some of it was quite tasty so she handed it to the man who helped himself to a bite. When God catches up with them and holds them accountable, their response is classic and pretty funny. In fact it sounds a lot like my kids when I caught them misbehaving. “She made me do it,” he says and she blames it on the snake. So they are kicked out of the garden and the story of history starts.

So what exactly goes wrong here? The story is pretty sexy, what with the man and woman walking around naked. And so some have concluded that the basic human problem has something to do with sex. Our original sin is sexual. The Early Christian theologians – such as Augustine – jumped all over that and the legacy is a lingering Christian discomfort with human sexuality, a two-millennia suspicion that celibacy is morally superior. The issue remains as current as persistent evangelical Christian opposition to sex education and the traditional Roman Catholic Church’s insistence that human sexuality is only for procreation. Only recently has the church grudgingly acknowledged that sex might also be enjoyable and that enjoyment is not always a bad thing.

Another direction is that the basic human problem is pride. The man and woman don’t obey the rule because they think they know better. They essentially put themselves in the driver’s seat in the garden: replace God with the human being, the person, the ego. This is a provocative idea. We are born, after all, with a built-in sense that we, indeed, are the center of whatever universe there is. Our needs are urgent, immediate, and if someone doesn’t immediately feed us, change our diapers and cradle us in a warm blanket, we are equipped to let the world know our unhappiness, full volume.

Some suggest that doesn’t change much. Our problem, our sin – if you will – and now we’re talking about Original Sin – is our pride, our hubris, our ego and egotism, our deep-seated insistence that we are at the very center of the universe. Martin Luther came up with an unforgettable image – the human soul, he said, curves in on itself. And, of course, St. Paul lamented that he didn’t do the things he should and did all the things he shouldn’t do. This is substantive – but it is also the source of a lot of guilt, particularly when it hooks up with the suspicion that sexuality is close to the heart of it as well. Fire and brimstone preaching, full of threats and assurances of God’s anger at human disobedience has filled many a heart with fear. And even more importantly, it has shaped the popular image of

Christianity and the Christian Church as unhappy about the human condition and the human prospect.

Anne Lamott says she always thought about God as a high school principal, looking through your files and not at all happy with what he finds there.

There is a third, more recent direction to take. Harvard's Harvey Cox thinks that to focus on sex and pride, hubris, arrogant disobedience is to quite miss the point. The human sin in the story, Cox wrote, is sloth, refusing to be responsible, not pride but moral laziness: not thinking too highly of ourselves, but not highly enough. The man and woman refused to be responsible, wouldn't even accept responsibility for their own behavior. He blames her and she blames the serpent. I'm intrigued with that, and am inclined to think, without rejecting the notion of sin as pride, that Cox gets it right. The man and woman refused to be responsible for the welfare of the garden or their own behavior. Sloth interestingly is one of the original deadly sins, the Greek words is Acedic – and it is the determined refusal to be all that we can be, to refuse to acknowledge that God made us to be responsible for ourselves, our families, our community, our nation, our world.

Nature is typically our first religious experience, and nature – creation, is good.

Human beings are created in the image of God. It's right there in the first page of the Bible: male – female, men – women – together reflecting God's own image. Created with innate, God-given worth and value, dignity – majesty even. Think of the enormous social, economic and political implications of believing that.

Human beings are not expendable. Black Lives Matter. Human lives matter. No one should be abused, used, exploited, discriminated against, denied, oppressed. It's written into the nature of things.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, a group of brave patriots wrote in 1776.

> "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among those are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted."

The Founders were all over the map theologically and ecclesiastically, but their political conclusions are in a straight line with the remarkable Judeo-Christian story of creation. Governments don't get to use, abuse, and exploit people for the King's profit or entertainment. Governments are for the purpose of protecting the rights of people. That was revolutionary

thinking 250 years ago and it is revolutionary today. Civil Rights, voting rights, the right to be treated equally – not on the basis of your skin color, gender, class or sexual orientation – but on the basis of your God-given humanity. “You are a child of God, made in God’s image.”

There is a worm in the apple. All is not well in the garden. There is a considerable gap between human potential and human .

So it makes sense to say it, acknowledge it, face the reality of it. And so we Presbyterians, before we get very far in our formal worship of god, take a long, hard look at ourselves personally, and as a community, and confess our sins – ask God to forgive us.

Nevertheless, we are responsible for the garden, for the health and welfare of the earth and its human community. In the simplest terms, each one of us is responsible for our own lives, our families, communities, nature, and ultimately the earth.

There are real implications here. It’s our job to manage – not to blame someone else when they go wrong – but to accept the God-given, and God-blessed responsibility

And yet, an embarrassingly and shockingly low percentage of us exercise even minimal responsibility for the life of our communities and nature by showing up to vote.

And Pope Francis reminded the church and the world recently that a tragedy that continues to unfold every single day of our lives, as climate change and global warming result in devastation, unprecedented fires, floods, extreme weather – met by a refusal even to acknowledge our part in the problem, our responsibility.

At the heart of our faith, all the way back thousands of years, is that there is a God who created all there is; that creation is essentially good; that human beings are created in God’s image and given the great gift of responsibility for the whole project.

> When I look at your heavens,
> the work of your fingers,
> the moon and stars that
> you have established:
> What are human beings that you
> are mindful of them,
> mortals, that you care for them?
>
> Yet, you have made them a little
> lower than God,
> and crowned them with glory

and honor.
You have given them dominion
over the works of your hands.

O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in
all the earth.